

# **Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children**

## **The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Pennsylvania, Highlights**

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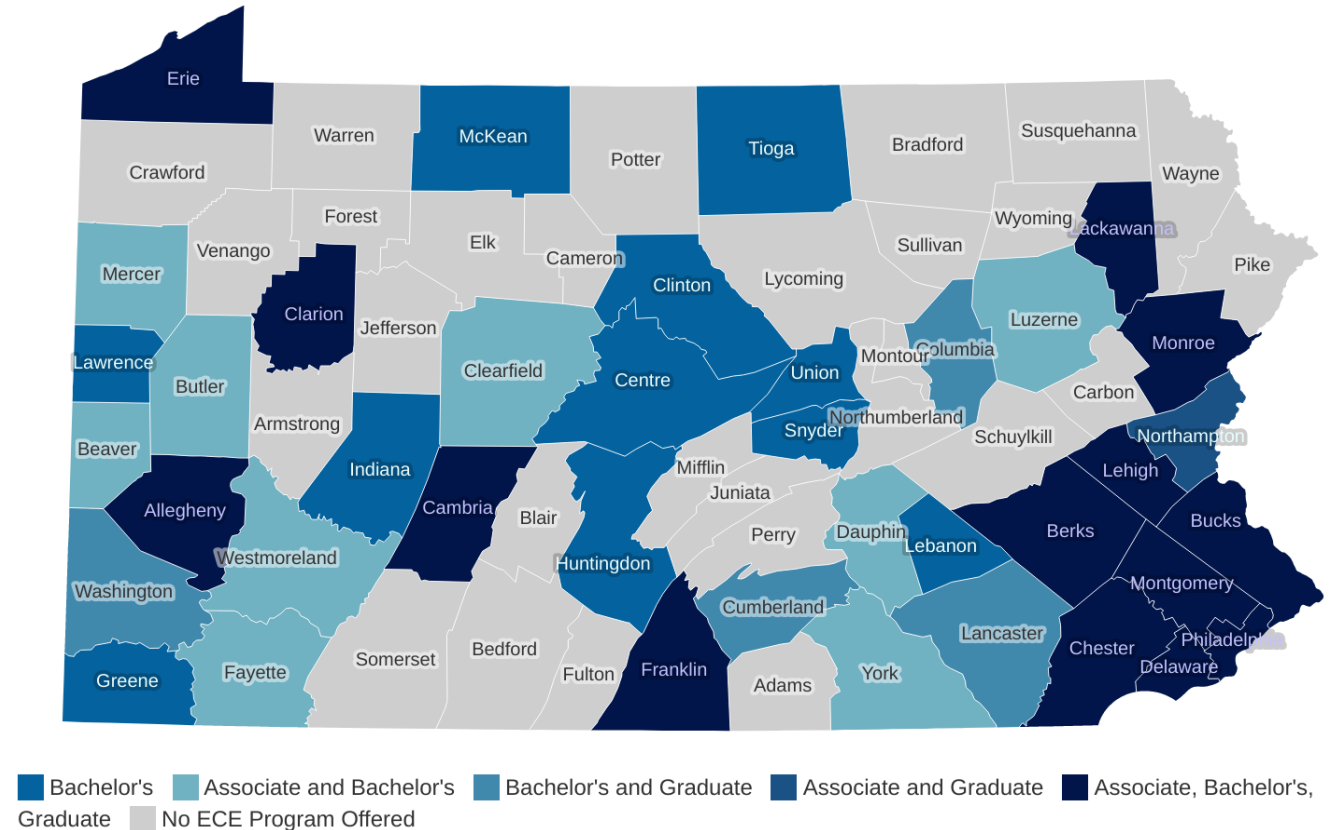
### **Introduction**

Through research and practice, the early care and education (ECE) field has demonstrated that early educators play a central and critical role in the development and learning of infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. The importance of ECE to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic well-being is recognized up to the highest levels of government and in businesses, schools, and living rooms across the country. Adequate preparation for teachers, workplace supports that allow for ongoing reflection and development, and appropriate compensation are all variables that are necessary to attract and retain a skilled workforce.

Pennsylvania is home to more than 840,000 children under the age of six. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 71 percent of these young children had all available parents in the labor force and thus potentially needed child care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Stakeholders and advocates in Pennsylvania are committed to advancing strategies that improve ECE services, including workforce preparation and development in order to ensure that early educators have what they need to meet the complex needs of young children. Critical to these efforts is the establishment of a well-coordinated, comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can train and support an incoming generation of educators, while also strengthening the skills of the existing early education workforce. Institutions of higher education are crucial to meeting the evolving and increasing demands identified as improving developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population.

The following pages highlight findings from the Pennsylvania Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory, focusing on the extent to which early childhood education programs offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation. The narrative report, *Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children: The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Pennsylvania* presents the findings in full.

## DISTRIBUTION OF PENNSYLVANIA EARLY CHILDHOOD DEGREE PROGRAMS



# Part 1: Early Childhood Higher Education, Mapping the Scene

*This section examines current program offerings as well as the historical context that led to current program certifications.*

## Finding One: Program Offerings

Most Pennsylvania early childhood degree programs identified their primary goal as teacher preparation across early childhood and elementary school settings or as preparation for multiple roles in many types of settings. While these programs offer a range of topics related to child development and approaches to teaching, the age-group focus varied, with the least amount of content focused on children from birth to age two. Associate degree programs were more likely to require a focus on children from birth through pre-K, while bachelor's and master's degree programs were more likely to focus on children in pre-K and elementary school. Availability of content related to administration and leadership is inconsistent across degree levels.

## Finding Two: Field-Based Learning Experiences

Bachelor's degree programs are more likely than associate degree programs to require students to participate in student teaching or practica. When such field-based learning experiences are required, students across degree programs are more likely to be required to participate in a practicum experience. However, there is little consistency as to the duration, frequency, and age-group focus of these field experiences.

## Finding Three: 2013 Certification Changes

In 2013, Pennsylvania discontinued the certifications for nursery through grade 3 (N-3) and kindergarten through grade 6 (K-6) and enacted the certification for pre-kindergarten through grade 4 (pre-K-4), leading to mixed results for birth-to-age-three (B-3) content in higher education programming (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). Content specific for early childhood continues to be shortlisted, while the focus primarily remains on elementary education. Additionally, in 2018 Pennsylvania passed legislation consolidating the previous special education certifications (pre-K to grade 8 and grade 7-12) into a single certification for pre-kindergarten to grade 12/age 21, while eliminating the dual certification in early education and special education (Public School Code of 1949, No.

82, 2018). This certification shift likely further reduced the time future practitioners spend on specific early childhood education content within their degree programs focused on special education.

## Part 2: An Evolving Landscape: Integration of Standards and Competencies Into Coursework

*This section examines the challenges degree programs face when integrating multiple standards and competencies, accreditation requirements, and licensure requirements into their curricular and program offerings.*

Degree program coordinators and faculty are faced with the challenge of covering a breadth of content required for degree completion while also integrating a variety of learning standards and competencies and meeting accreditation criteria. A majority of programs surveyed indicated that their course content aligns with two or more state competency or ECE standards, and nearly half of program personnel interviewed stated that their degree program was accredited by NAEYC or in process of seeking accreditation.

## Part 3: Early Childhood Higher Education, Faculty Profile

*This section of the report examines the extent to which the faculty workforce is prepared to provide early childhood practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills associated with effective teaching practice and program leadership.*

### Finding Four: Portrait of Faculty Members

Pennsylvania early childhood degree programs are staffed with a mix of part- and full-time faculty. Faculty members are primarily White women who are monolingual (speaking only English) and therefore less diverse than Pennsylvania's child population. Most faculty members across degree levels reported having had academic preparation specific to early childhood, and nearly one half of the faculty members reported having also worked in a professional role in early care and education in the past decade.

### Finding Five: Faculty Perspectives and Expertise

Pennsylvania early childhood degree faculty were more likely to consider incorporating inclusive classroom content compared to other course content. In general, faculty members were more likely to report feeling that content areas were “very important” for teachers working with school-age children. Across content areas, faculty members reported feeling least capable of preparing teachers to work with infants/toddlers, as compared to older children. Pennsylvania early childhood degree program faculty reported particular interest in professional development related to working with children from diverse cultural backgrounds and children with disabilities, as well as techniques for engaging families.

## Part 4: Early Childhood Higher Education Program Commitments

*This section examines to what extent institutes of higher education are prepared/equipped to support students with degree completion or articulation as well as institutional challenges.*

### Finding Six: Supporting Students

Pennsylvania early childhood degree programs offer multiple types of support services specifically tailored to help early childhood education students access resources and strengthen their academic skills. Associate degree programs are more likely than bachelor's degree programs to offer blended programs (combining online and in-person courses) as well as other access supports such as alternative class schedules and classes in community locations. Across all degree levels, programs provide little academic support for students and even less support specifically for adult English-language learners. Although most degree programs participating in the Inventory reported having an articulation agreement with at least one other college or university, inconsistent articulation was reported as a challenge by the majority of programs.

### Finding Seven: Program Challenges

Pennsylvania early childhood degree programs experience challenges related to the time and resources faculty members require to fulfill their responsibilities, as well as the need for faculty members with specific expertise, such as teaching dual language learners. The majority of program leads indicated that the low pay of the ECE field has led to challenges in recruiting and retaining students.

## Part 5: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Lasting Impact on Early Childhood Higher Education

*This section highlights several significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pennsylvania's institutes of higher education, early childhood degree programs, faculty members, and students.*

### Finding Eight: Minor Changes to Programs

Pennsylvania early childhood degree programs reported that they switched learning modality to virtual at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued with this instruction type throughout the Fall 2020 term. While the modality of instruction for Pennsylvania early childhood degree programs changed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants noted that there were few-to-no changes in curriculum or requirements.

### Finding Nine: Faculty Members Face Challenges Adapting

As faculty adapted traditionally in-person coursework to be implemented online, they also saw changes to other work situations. Financial strain caused some institutes of higher education to adapt by doing more with fewer investments. Faculty members were asked to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their workload.

# Recommendations

Here we outline an approach toward strengthening early childhood workforce development in Pennsylvania, with an emphasis on higher education. The efforts should be coordinated among key stakeholders in Pennsylvania, including the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, the Office of Postsecondary and Adult Education, and the many institutes of higher education tasked with preparing early educators in the state. The success of stakeholder efforts is predicated on identifying new resources from state, federal, and philanthropic sources.

## 1. Develop a mentor teacher program to support new teachers and students

Expand Pennsylvania's [educator induction program](#) to include non-certified early educators, or develop a mentor teacher program to support new teachers and students entering into early learning settings from birth to grade 4. The mentor teacher program should recruit currently certified teachers who:

- Hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or an equivalent field;
- Have a minimum of three years of experience; and
- Are recommended by their site director/principal.

## 2. Unify expectations for early childhood workforce preparation

Expand the pre-K-to-grade-4 endorsement to begin at birth to ensure that educators working in early childhood and early elementary have an understanding of development and learning taking place prior to pre-kindergarten.

## 3. Strengthen program content and equity across the age span

Provide resources to develop and support participation in faculty professional development. Faculty members across degree programs and institutions would thus be enabled to collaborate with other experts to develop and enhance program content standards related to:

- **Child Development and Pedagogy**, preparing teachers to work with children of different ages, including:

- Infant and toddler development and learning across multiple domains; and
- Methods of teaching and pedagogy for children of different ages;
- **Dual Language Learners**, emphasizing:
  - Recognition of the value and importance of supporting children's home-language development as they also learn English, with an emphasis on very young children;
  - Strategies for using observation and assessment in teaching young dual language learners and strategies to support the mathematical, literacy, language, cognitive, and social-emotional development of young dual language learners; and
  - An understanding of the strengths and needs of adults from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to support their entry and retention in the ECE field; and
- **Trauma**, preparing practitioners to work with children and families who have experienced trauma and/or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

#### 4. Strengthen the application of field-based learning experiences

- Provide resources and support to faculty members across degree programs and institutions to develop degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, with opportunities focused on children from infancy through the early elementary grades;
- Develop differentiated field experiences for pre- and in-service students. For pre-service students, extend more opportunities for in-depth student teaching experiences, and for in-service students, explore and implement models that accommodate those already working in classrooms, while also providing quality experiences (e.g., the California Early Childhood Mentor Program); and
- Provide field-based learning opportunities for students to engage with:
  - Infants and toddlers;
  - Children with disabilities;
  - Children who are dual language learners;
  - Families from diverse backgrounds; and
  - Community organizations that support children and families.



## 5. Provide increased access and supports for students in attaining their degrees

Implement or expand the following supports for early childhood students throughout the state to ensure that a diverse in-service and incoming workforce can successfully meet standards and attain competency:

- Increased financial and technical support for students enrolled in blended or fully online degree programs;
- Alternative class schedules and locations;
- Academic counseling;
- Cohort models; and
- Financial resources for students.

## 6. Establish partnerships among and improve articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions

- Ensure that all community colleges have a comprehensive articulation agreement with a bachelor's-granting college or university that is geographically accessible to students;
- Expand the opportunities for students to earn associate degrees at bachelor's-granting institutions to facilitate more seamless transfer between degrees; and
- Offer dedicated advising staff who can provide students with the necessary guidance to take full advantage of articulation agreements, including information on the transfer process, required courses, and accepted credits.

## 7. Build a leadership pipeline reflective of the diversity in the state's ECE practitioner and child populations

- Identify the appropriate course of study and degree level (associate, bachelor's, graduate) for each leadership role based on specific skills and knowledge;
- Ensure training and ongoing professional opportunities for faculty members teaching coursework on supervision, administration, and leadership development in undergraduate and graduate degree programs;
- Identify options to create leadership pathways and/or programs; and
- Ensure an adequate number of degree programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level that offer the appropriate course content.

- Investigate strategies used in other professions (e.g., health, education, social welfare) to create faculty development programs—such as a fellowship or grant—intended to increase diversity among faculty members, particularly in key leadership positions;
- Identify options to increase faculty members' expertise in working with college students, young children, and families of diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds; and
- Provide opportunities for faculty members to pursue professional development related to teaching dual language learners, including strategies to develop the language, literacy, mathematical, and cognitive abilities of this population.

## 8. Increase faculty supports

- Develop strategies to support an increase in the number of full-time faculty members with sufficient release time who can share in administrative responsibilities.
- Establish an ongoing fund with well-articulated expectations for faculty members' professional development honoraria and program improvement grants;
- Strengthen faculty expertise in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) pedagogy to better prepare educators to support children's STEM development and skills;
- Develop additional opportunities for faculty professional development in the areas of preparing practitioners to work with infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, children from diverse backgrounds, and children who have experienced trauma; and
- Ensure adequate resources, including funding, staffing, and dedicated time for program planning and improvement.

## References

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